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ABSTRACT

The amount of literature on program evaluation decreased in 1996, continuing a trend begun in the late 1980s. One exception to this is the literature on assessment. Another frequent issue is the technique of evaluation. Many examples of research on evaluation are from international settings, where accountability and evaluation appear to be integrated into institutional systems. Student learning and satisfaction with services tend to be the focus of evaluation and assessment. An exception to the trend away from systemic evaluation is a paper by Aquirre and Hawkins, "Why Reinvent the Wheel? Let's Adapt Our Institutional Assessment Model," which describes an integrated assessment and strategic planning process designed to comply with accountability requirements at a community college in New Mexico. Most evaluation studies occur as students leave school or after they have graduated, and it would be helpful to have more evaluations while students were still in school. Some articles suggest ways to improve the process of evaluation. One area where research on evaluation is prevalent is research on new or nontraditional academic experiences, such as first-year seminars or bridge programs, experiential learning, and distance education. Some evaluation focuses specifically on faculty members, exploring the quality of teaching and research. Research on staff members' impact on student learning or experience is minimal. (Contains 12 references.) (JM)

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Higher Education Trends (1997-1999): Program Evaluation

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Higher Education Trends (1997-1999)
Program Evaluation

by Adrianna J Kezar

The amount of literature on program evaluation is down from previous years, continuing a trend begun in the late 1980s. Although the research on program evaluation is declining, that on assessment is on the rise. Approach or technique of evaluation is a frequent issue, including which groups (students, faculty, staff), time periods (before, during, or after college), or level (classroom, department, school, college) should be studied. Many examples of research on evaluation are from international settings, where accountability and evaluation appear to be more integrated into institutional systems (Brennan et al.). Students' learning and satisfaction with services tend to be the focus of evaluation and assessment.

Approaches to Evaluation

One of the most notable trends is that systemic or comprehensive evaluation is not widespread in the literature, the research, or programs in practice. One exception to this trend is a paper by Francisco Aguirre and Linda Hawkins, "Why Reinvent the Wheel? Let's Adapt Our Institutional Assessment Model," which describes an integrated assessment and strategic planning process to comply with requirements for accountability at the community college affiliated with New Mexico State University at Alamogordo. The article describes assessment tools that include surveys from the community, students, faculty, and employers, a data form from new students, a survey of withdrawing students, and a high school survey.

Most evaluation occurs as students leave school, some occurs after students have graduated (Webb et al.), and occasionally research or evaluation is performed while students are still in school (Donald and Denison; Kowlowitz et al.; Rowlands et al.). For example, Donald and Denison present a Canadian institution's experience with assessing graduates' undergraduate experiences, examining the extent to which broad indicators of performance could be used to improve university programs. If programs are being evaluated, the results are not being shared or published. This outcome could be the result of the publication process, which prefers original research or new ideas, not the evaluation of current programs. A Web site sharing different types of program evaluations would be an asset, providing those interested in developing evaluations with a point of comparison for their results. More long-term and longitudinal studies are needed, and it would be helpful to have more evaluation while students are still in school, not just as they are leaving or after they are gone.

Some articles about evaluating research suggest ways to improve the process of evaluation. For example, John Biggs argues that institutions implicitly encourage quantitative assessment, thus encouraging a surface approach to learning, although qualitative methods support a deeper approach and should be integrated into the assessments. The research on methods for evaluating programs, departments, or institutions is very important. Institutions are struggling to develop successful evaluations that give them useful information, not just information that is placed on a shelf to collect dust.

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Evaluating New Programs and Innovations

One area where research on evaluation is more prevalent is new or nontraditional academic experiences, including first-year seminars or bridge programs, experiential learning, and distance education (Hanley and Olson; Reid et al.). For example, one published evaluation of a precollege program identifies several key elements in a program's success: course content, teaching techniques, and support for personal, psychological, and attitudinal changes (Hanley and Olson). An evaluation of experiential learning examines the validity of supervisors' assessments; validity appears to have been enhanced by students' use of a well-specified intervention model and structured recording forms. Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson describe an evaluation of distance learning from overseas. The results suggest that the instrument is useful not only in determining satisfaction, but also in evaluating the relative contribution of specific program components to a program's overall success.

Evaluating Teaching and Research

Some evaluation focuses specifically on faculty members and explores the quality of teaching and research (see also "Faculty"). An accompanying body of research evaluates faculty research. Although currently limited, it will likely become an area for research, given public pressures for accountability, quality teaching, and faculty productivity (Florida State Postsecondary Education Planning Commission). William Patrick and Elizabeth Stanley, in "Assessment of Research Quality," describe the British experience with quality assessment of research and newly introduced measures to improve research programs' accountability.

Research on staff members' impact on students' learning or experiences is minimal. Some institutional studies focused on service examine this aspect, but few national studies look at the impact of housing staff, counseling, financial aid, and other campus services on students. This area clearly needs research. Various functional units' methods of evaluation and results could be posted on a Web site to help provide a model for institutions and programs.

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